ONE

The Structure of Chinese Funerary Rites: Elementary Forms, Ritual Sequence, and the Primacy of Performance

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In one important respect this collection of essays is the sequel to an earlier volume entitled *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*.[1] The popular-culture conference (held in 1980) considered the general theme of Chinese cultural diversity and uniformity, looking specifically at the question What held Chinese society together? There were, of course, many institutions and social processes that led to the creation of a unified, centrally organized culture in late imperial China. One of the most obvious was control over the written word as expressed in literature and religious texts;[2] equally important was the subtle manipulation of oral performing arts, notably opera and public storytelling.[3] The authors of *Popular Culture* approached the problem of diversity within unity from many angles, but conference discussions made it clear that one important dimension was missing, namely, ritual.

If anything is central to the creation and maintenance of a unified Chinese culture, it is the standardization of ritual. To be Chinese is to understand, and accept the view, that there is a correct way to perform rites associated with the life-cycle, the most important being weddings and funerals. By following accepted ritual routines ordinary citizens participated in the process of cultural unification. In most cases they did so voluntarily,

1. David Johnson, Andrew Nathan, and Evelyn Rawski, eds., *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).

2. David Johnson, "Communication, Class, and Consciousness in Late Imperial China," in Johnson et al., *Popular Culture*, pp. 34–72; James Hayes, "Specialists and Written Materials in the Village World," in Johnson et al., *Popular Culture*, pp. 75–111.

3. Tanaka Issei, "The Social and Historical Context of Ming-Ch'ing Local Drama," in Johnson et al., *Popular Culture*, pp. 143–160; Barbara E. Ward, "Regional Operas and Their Audiences," in Johnson et al., *Popular Culture*, pp. 161–187; and "Not Merely Players: Drama, Act, and Ritual in Traditional China," *Man* n.s. 14 (1979): 18–39.

without the necessity of enforcement by state authorities. What we accept today as "Chinese" is in large part the product of a centuries-long process of ritual standardization.

This volume, therefore, is more than a set of essays about death and mortuary ritual: It is a study in cultural homogenization as expressed in performance, practice, and beliefs regarding the dead. The essays that follow demonstrate that there was a uniform structure of funerary rites in late imperial China. The elements of this structure are outlined below. It is my contention that the proper performance of the rites, in the accepted sequence, was of paramount importance in determining who was and who was not deemed to be fully "Chinese." Performance, in other words, took precedence over belief—it mattered little what one believed about death or the afterlife as long as the rites were performed properly. The polemical tone of this essay is deliberate. It is hoped that others will take up the cause of belief, thereby leading to an exchange of views regarding the role of ritual in Chinese society.

RITUAL: THE TRANSFORMATIVE ASPECT

Given that this volume focuses on funeral rites and mortuary practices, it seems appropriate to begin with a general discussion of ritual. There is, of course, a vast literature on this problem, and I do not propose to review all aspects of the topic here. Suffice it to note that anthropologists have long debated the meaning and definition of ritual; unfortunately, little agreement has been reached among contending schools, and there is still no generally accepted definition.[4] However, in all studies of the subject it is generally assumed that ritual is about transformation—in particular it relates to the transformation of one being or state into another, changed being or state. Most anthropologists would agree that it is this transformative aspect that sets ritual apart from other social actions. That which is merely repeated is not necessarily ritual. Rather, rituals are repeated because they are expected to have transformative powers.[5] Rituals change people and things; the ritual process is active, not merely passive.

4. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969); Jean La Fontaine, ed., *The Interpretation of Ritual* (London: Tavistock, 1972); Clyde Kluckhohn, "Myths and Rituals: A General Theory," *Harvard Theological Review* 35 (1942): 45–79; S. J. Tambiah, "A Performative Approach to Ritual" (Radcliffe-Brown Lecture, 1979), *Proceedings of the British Academy* 65 (1979): 113–169; Sally Falk Moore and Barbara Myerhoff, eds., *Secular Ritual* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1977); Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Ronald Grimes, "Ritual Studies: Two Models," *Religious Studies Review* 2, no. 4 (1976): 13–24.

5. Fred W. Clothey, *Rhythm and Intent: Ritual Studies from South India* (Bombay: Blackie and Son, 1983), pp. 1–5.

One of the most insightful studies of ritual to appear in recent years is Gilbert Lewis's *Day of Shining Red*.[6] This study is a minute "unpacking" of a puberty rite practiced by New Guinea villagers. The author works his way through the received definitions of ritual only to find them wanting. He concludes: "What is clear and explicit about ritual is how to do it—rather than its meaning."[7] The people he worked among knew how to perform rites, and they knew when something was performed incorrectly, but they could not provide ready explanations (in words) for what was being expressed, communicated, or symbolized. This, of course, is a familiar problem to all fieldworkers, not just those who work in New Guinea.

Lewis raises a fundamental question that, at one time or another, has haunted most scholars who attempt to analyze rituals: How can we go beyond what we are told by informants, texts, or documentary sources?[8] Many anthropologists try to create meaning by reassembling symbols, metaphors, and actions into a coherent set of messages—thereby engaging in structural analyses of various types. Lewis is not alone in questioning such procedures.[9] Whose meaning are we constructing when rituals are interpreted: our informants' or our own? Nor is it possible, as some have suggested, to present "value free" or "pure" descriptions of ritual, devoid of contaminating interpretations by the observer. The very act of description involves multiple judgments regarding the behavior being performed. Even the most detailed description demands that one isolate certain actions as being more significant than others.

Films and photographs of ritual present equally complicated problems of analysis. During the conference that preceded this volume participants observed nearly twenty hours of slides and films dealing with Chinese funerary ritual. It was fascinating, and enlightening, to learn that everyone present "saw" something different in the visual records of Chinese rites. Historians and anthropologists, in particular, did not even appear to be witnessing the same events, to judge from their comments (the historians were preoccupied with written messages and texts evident in the slides or films, whereas anthropologists tended to treat these messages as peripheral or at least secondary to the actions of ritual specialists; see Evelyn Rawski's observations on this matter, chapter 2). I might add that such variation in interpretation is also true for those who actually participate in funerals and perform the rites portrayed in ethnographic films or slides. Among Cantonese villagers in rural Hong Kong, for instance, there is no generally

6. Gilbert Lewis, *Day of Shining Red: An Essay on Understanding Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

7. Ibid., p. 19.

8. Ibid., p. 24.

9. See, e.g., Roger M. Keesing, *Kwaio Religion: The Living and the Dead in a Solomon Island Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 3–5, 181–187.

accepted agreement regarding the signification or symbolism of rituals. When I asked about the meaning of an act or a symbol I was usually told, "I'm not clear about that. We do it this way because that's how it has always been done."

Rituals must be routinized and conventionalized before they can be accepted as part of the standard repertoire at a Chinese funeral. But this does not mean that they are immutable. In fact, several chapters in this volume focus on cases of ritual variability and modification to suit changing political circumstances (see especially chapters by Rawski, Wakeman, R. Watson, and Whyte). These changes are always made, however, within a recognizable framework of cultural convention; modifications are never arbitrary, given that they must conform to general notions of "Chineseness."

Closely associated with the problem of convention are notions of performance and audience. All rituals must have an audience to judge the quality and conventionality of the performance. When considering Chinese funerary ritual the question of audience becomes very complex. Who judges, and thereby validates, the performance? the deceased? the community? the gods, ancestors, and guardians of hell? or the performers of the rites themselves? Among rural Cantonese all of these interested parties represent the audience or separate audiences. But most villagers make it clear by their actions that the general community, represented by neighbors and kin, constitutes the most important audience. It is the community that determines convention and affirms that a funeral has been performed properly (a botched funeral can have disastrous consequences for everyone involved; see chapter 5). As with Lewis's informants, Cantonese villagers know what is correct and what is not; they represent a hypercritical audience even though they may not be able to articulate the reasons for their strongly held views about ritual propriety. Lewis nicely summarizes these issues: "In ritual as in art, he who devises or creates or performs is also spectator of what he does; and he who beholds it is also active in the sense that he interprets the performance. The value of ritual lies partly in this ambiguity of the active and passive for creator, performer and beholder."[10]

At Chinese funerals the general audience plays an active role, together with paid professionals, in creating a ritual performance. Community members are both the observed and the observers; they play a leading part in performing the rites while at the same time acting as audience. It is the proper performance of the rites—by specialists, mourners, and community members—that matters most to everyone concerned. As I shall argue below, the internal state of the participants, their personal beliefs and predispositions, are largely irrelevant.

10. Lewis, *Day of Shining Red*, p. 38.

THE STRUCTURE OF RITES, I: THE IDEOLOGICAL DOMAIN

One of the central themes emerging from this study, as was noted earlier, is the view that there was a uniform structure of funeral rites in China during the late imperial era. This structure is still very much alive in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and some overseas Chinese areas, but it no longer dominates the ritual life of modern China as it did in the past. This is particularly true of Chinese cities, although it is evident that traditional rites are reemerging in many parts of rural China (see Whyte's discussion in chapter 12).[11] Prerevolution burial practices are evident throughout rural Kwangtung, and in 1985 the ritual paraphernalia for traditional funerals were readily available in rural markets.[12] However, in comparison with Taiwan and Hong Kong, contemporary China seems peculiarly devoid of *public* rituals that have a religious content (i.e., festivals and collective displays of devotion). There is, of course, a great deal of public ritual activity in China, but it is strictly controlled by the party and is directly related to the political goals of the central administration.[13] The deritualization, and possible reritualization, of Chinese religious life is a subject that deserves a full-scale, interdisciplinary study by a team of scholars familiar with the traditional system. It is difficult to determine whether China, in the late 1980s, now has a uniform structure of funerary rites. Whyte suggests (chapter 12) that there is a growing dichotomy between rural and urban sectors in the People's Republic, with different rites emerging in city and countryside. The implications of this will be discussed below.

During the late imperial era (approximately 1750 to 1920)[14] rituals associated with marriage and death constituted a kind of "cultural cement" that helped hold this vastly complex and diversified society together. There are several ways to approach the problem of structural uniformity: It is not a simple matter of assembling a check list of ritual acts and routines, nor is it of particular concern that elements of the structure may be found in other societies. Rather, it is the unique *configuration* of ritual elements that makes a funeral acceptably Chinese. It was, in other words, a coherent package of

11. See also William L. Parish and Martin K. Whyte, *Village and Family in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 260–266.

12. Author's field investigations, Kwangtung province, summer 1985.

13. Martin King Whyte, *Small Groups and Political Rituals in China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974); Richard Madsen, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).

14. The year 1920 might be accepted as a rough "cutoff" date for the late imperial era, although for certain features of cultural life (e.g., lineage organization, ancestor worship, folk religion) 1940 or even 1950 may serve as well. This is a matter of some debate among anthropologists.

actions, routines, and performances which constituted the structure of Chinese rites.

There are two domains within which the processes of ritual standardization can be analyzed. The first might be called the ideological domain, given that it is concerned with abstract notions regarding the relationship between life and death. Many of the essays in this volume deal specifically with the ideological aspects of mortuary rites (see chapters by Cohen and Martin). Among Chinese, there was a strong belief in the continuity between this world (life) and the next (death). Both worlds were governed by bureaucratic principles that mirrored the imperial bureaucracy.[15] There was, as Thomas Laqueur pointed out during conference discussions, no radical dualism in Chinese thought—separating body from soul—similar to the central concern that governed European notions of life and death. In other words, the "moment of death," whereby body and soul were forever parted, did not have the same meaning among Chinese as it had among Europeans.[16] One of the primary goals of Chinese funeral rites, in fact, was to keep corpse and spirit together during the initial stages of death; separation prior to the ritualized expulsion from the community was thought to bring disaster (see chapter 5).

Another key feature of Chinese ideology regarding the afterlife was the belief that one's social status remained largely unaffected by death. In particular, both worlds were dominated by kinship, and it was believed that death did not terminate the relationships between agnatic kinsmen (the status of women is more problematic and deserves further study).[17] It is important to note that, for most Chinese, it was patrilineal kinship that survived beyond death; matrilateral ties (through one's mother) and affinal links (through marriage) were generally terminated upon death. Ancestor worship was the concrete expression of this preoccupation with the patriline.

The ideological domain of late imperial China was also dominated by the notion that the soul, or spirit, was composed of several parts. There is considerable debate regarding the exact configuration of the soul,[18] but most observers accept a dual (*hun* versus *p'o*) or a tripartite (grave, domestic

15. Arthur P. Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 131–182; Emily Martin Ahern, *Chinese Ritual and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

16. Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Knopf, 1981).

17. On the ambiguous status of women in the afterlife, see James L. Watson, "Of Flesh and Bones: The Management of Death Pollution in Cantonese Society," in *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, eds. Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 178–180.

18. Stevan Harrell, "The Concept of Soul in Chinese Folk Religion," *Journal of Asian Studies* 38 (1979): 519–528.

shrine, hall tablet) division.[19] The origin of the *hun/p'o* dichotomy is the subject of an important essay by Ying-shih Yü.[20] Associated with this ideological complex was a preoccupation with controlling, managing, and placating the dangerous aspects of the spirit of the deceased. Much of the ritual at funerals is aimed specifically at settling the volatile and disoriented spirit of the recently dead. There is, in other words, a need for social control in the nether world; ideally no one should be allowed to wander at will, outside the constraints of kinship and community, in life or in death. To bury a person without proper attention to ritual details is to create a hungry ghost who will return to plague the living. The analogy between ghosts and bandits is a conscious one in Chinese society.[21] Both exist outside the constraints of family, kinship, and community.

Another uniform feature of the ideological domain is obvious to those who are familiar with Chinese mortuary practices. This is the idea that there must always be a balance between the sexes, even in death. The notion of gender, a cultural construction, survives in the Chinese afterlife (this is not the case in all societies). If it is at all possible, married people are reconstituted as couples in death, usually by burial in close proximity. Posthumous unions, often referred to as "ghost marriages,"[22] are sometimes arranged for unmarried people, for it is considered unnatural, in life and in death, to be without a spouse.

Closely associated with these ideas of social continuity is the final, and some might say the most important, feature of the Chinese ideological domain: the idea of *exchange* between living and dead. Death does not terminate relationships of reciprocity among Chinese, it simply transforms these ties and often makes them stronger. A central feature of Chinese funerals and postburial mortuary practices is the transfer of food, money, and goods to the deceased (see Thompson's discussion in chapter 4). In return the living expect to receive certain material benefits, including luck, wealth, and progeny.

This notion of continued exchange between living and dead is the foundation of late imperial China's ideological domain. In other words, all rituals associated with death are performed *as if* there were a continued relationship between living and dead. It is irrelevant whether or not participants actually *believe* that the spirit survives or that the presentation of offerings

19. See e.g., Maurice Freedman, "Ancestor Worship: Two Facets of the Chinese Case," in *Social Organization: Essays Presented to Raymond Firth*, ed. Maurice Freedman (London: Frank Cass, 1967), pp. 85–103.

20. Ying-shih Yü, "O Soul, Come Back: A Study of the Changing Conceptions of the Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47 (1987): 363–395.

21. Robert Weller, "Bandits, Beggars, and Ghosts: The Failure of State Control over Religious Interpretation in Taiwan," *American Ethnologist* 12 (1985): 46–61.

22. Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," pp. 150–152.

has an effect on the deceased. What matters is that the rites are performed according to accepted procedure.

The ideological domain in China, in other words, does not assume universal belief or unquestioned acceptance of "truth."[23] Here is where China may have been unique among centralized societies. There was, of course, a close relationship between the ideological domain and what I shall call the performative domain (i.e., ritual; see below) in late imperial China. But, unlike the common pattern one finds in Christian Europe and Hindu India, the two Chinese domains do not seem to be totally dependent upon each other. There was a noticeable disjuncture between the requirements of ritual standardization (which were absolute) and the maintenance of a centralized belief system (loosely organized at best and rarely enforced).

In dealing with religious cults among peasants, Chinese imperial authorities were content to control and legislate actions, not beliefs.[24] Much the same was true for funerary ritual. As long as the rites were performed according to standardized and generally accepted sequence, it was of little consequence what people actually thought about the efficacy of those rites. As Jonathan Parry and Thomas Laqueur (Indianist and Europeanist respectively) noted in conference discussions, a radical distinction between belief and practice was never a central feature of Hindu or Christian social orders. In early Christendom, for instance, it was belief that carried more weight than practice, and in later eras debates regarding the proper performance of the Eucharist focused on ideological concerns underpinning practice.[25]

It is my contention that this was not the case in late imperial China. The standardization of ritual practice almost always took precedence over efforts to legislate or control beliefs. This, I would argue, had profound consequences for the creation of a unified cultural system. By enforcing orthopraxy (correct practice)[26] rather than orthodoxy (correct belief) state officials made it possible to incorporate people from many different ethnic or regional backgrounds, with varying beliefs and attitudes, into an over-

23. The concept of belief, its definition and cross-cultural applicability, has been the subject of considerable debate among anthropologists; see, for example, Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language, and Experience* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972).

24. James L. Watson, "Standardizing the Gods: The Promotion of T'ien Hou (Empress of Heaven) Along the South China Coast, 960–1960," in Johnson et al., *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, pp. 292–324.

25. Charles Gore, *The Body of Christ: An Inquiry into the Institution and Doctrine of Holy Communion* (London: Murray, 1901); A. M. O'Neill, *The Mystery of the Eucharist* (Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1933); Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament,* vol. 1 (London: SCM Press, 1952); Richard A. Watson, "Transubstantiation among the Cartesians," in *Problems of Cartesianism*, eds. Thomas Lennon, John Nicholas, and John Davis (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1982), pp. 127–148.

26. Judith A. Berling, "Orthopraxy," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 11, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 129–132.

arching social system we now call China. Had this not been the strategy (conscious or unconscious) of state officials, Chinese culture could never have reached such heights of uniformity and coherence as it did during the late imperial era.

Before moving to a consideration of the performative domain, a clarification seems in order. I am *not* suggesting that belief and ideology are somehow irrelevant to the processes of cultural integration in China. Given the obvious uniformity of beliefs just surveyed, it would be absurd to make such a contention. Rather, I would argue that the Chinese state had no effective means of controlling beliefs regarding the afterlife in the absence of a unified church. There was, in other words, no centralized hierarchy of specialists charged with the responsibility of dispensing religious truth, as in Christendom. The closest equivalents would have been imperial bureaucrats, but these were relatively few in number,[27] and they were concerned primarily with good governance, not religious beliefs. What is truly intriguing about the Chinese case, therefore, is the fact that there *was* such a high level of uniformity in beliefs, attitudes, and conceptions regarding the dead. The creation of a unified culture obviously involved more than the conscious manipulation of the ideological domain by agents of the state, as some scholars have suggested.[28] I shall return to this point in the conclusion of this essay.

THE STRUCTURE OF RITES, II: THE PERFORMATIVE DOMAIN

A survey of ethnographic sources on Chinese funerals,[29] together with conference discussion, films, photographs, and the results of my own field research, leads me to conclude that there was indeed a prescribed set of ritual

27. On this point, see G. William Skinner, "Rural Marketing in China: Revival and Reappraisal," in *Markets and Marketing*, ed. Stuart Plattner (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America for the Society of Economic Anthropology, 1985), pp. 7–8.

28. See, e.g., Kung-chuan Hsiao, *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960), p. 225.

29. The Cantonese sequence is outlined in J. Watson, "Of Flesh and Bones." On ritual sequences in other parts of China, see Emily Ahern, *Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973); J. J. M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1892); Henry Doré, *Researches into Chinese Superstitions* (Shanghai: T'usewei, 1914); Bernard Gallin, *Hsin Hsing, Taiwan: A Chinese Village in Change* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 219–230; Sidney D. Gamble, *Ting Hsien: A North China Rural Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954), pp. 386–393; Francis L. K. Hsu, *Under the Ancestors' Shadow* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1967), pp. 154–166; and Arthur P. Wolf, "Chinese Kinship and Mourning Dress," in *Family and Kinship in Chinese Society*, ed. Maurice Freedman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970), pp. 189–207.

actions that had to be performed before a corpse could be expelled from the community and buried. These actions are perhaps best referred to as the elementary structure of funeral rites, in the sense that they were performed, with minor variations, throughout China during the late imperial era, irrespective of class, status, or material circumstance. It is important to distinguish between *funerary rites* and *rites of disposal*.[30] The former involve actions undertaken from the moment of death to the formal expulsion of the deceased (in a sealed coffin) from the community. Rites of disposal are distinct from funeral rites in that the procedures of burial, cremation, or coffin storage are not governed by universally accepted norms. In fact, once the corpse is removed from the community almost any form of disposal is permitted. More will be said below about variations in burial practices.

What were the main features of funeral ritual in late imperial China? It appears that by Ming and Ch'ing a uniform structure had emerged, based roughly on classical models outlined in the *Li chi* and later simplified by Chu Hsi and others (see Rawski's account in chapter 2). The standardized rites required the following actions:

(1) Public notification of death by wailing and other expressions of grief. Women of the household, in particular, announced the death to neighbors by high-pitched, stereotyped wailing. Such actions were required by survivors; they were not voluntary. Formal notification of death was also given by pasting white banners on the house of the deceased and hanging blue lanterns from the eaves (these actions were optional in some parts of China, whereas the wailing was not).

(2) Donning of white clothing, shoes, and hoods (made of sackcloth or hemp) by mourners. The degree of kinship between the deceased and the mourner was often coded in the style of dress.[31] There were, of course, many regional variations in color symbolism and garment ensemble, but the use of white as an unambiguous symbol of mourning was a key feature of Chinese funerary ritual.

(3) Ritualized bathing of the corpse. This act was often accompanied by a final change of clothing deemed to be suitable for the journey to the otherworld. The provision of new or special clothing was optional and may not have been common among the poor, but the bathing of the corpse was an essential feature of the rites. In south China the water was often purchased (for a token sum of real money) from the deity of a well

30. Rubie S. Watson (chapter 9) notes that there is also a fundamental distinction between *funeral rites* (which are prescribed) and *grave rites* (which are fluid and subject to political manipulation).

31. Wolf, "Chinese Kinship and Mourning Dress."

or a stream; this rite is called *mai-shui* (lit. "buying water").[32] The bathing of the corpse varied from a full, vigorous scrubbing to a ritualized daubing of the forehead.

(4) The transfer of food, money, and goods from the living to the dead. Mock money and paper models of items to be used in the afterlife (e.g., houses, furniture, servants, vehicles, etc.) were transmitted by burning. Food was presented in the form of offerings, whereby the essence of the gift was consumed by the deceased while the remnants were often eaten by the mourners. It appears that there was an element of symbolic communication implicit in these prestations, with pork and rice being the irreducible food gifts (see chapter 4 by Thompson). In addition to food, the basic set of material offerings to the deceased included mock money and incense[33]—all other offerings were thus optional. This elementary feature of the rites was a concrete expression of the continuing relationship between living and dead.

(5) The preparation and installation of a soul tablet for the dead. All deceased Chinese, save those who died as infants or as wandering strangers, had to have a written tablet to serve as a repository for one aspect of their soul. This feature of the rites required the services of a literate person, usually a ritual specialist. The finished tablet of most married people was installed in the domestic altar of the deceased's household (tablets in ancestral halls—outside the home—were not an essential part of the rites but an option few could afford).[34] Unmarried women and other people who were not deemed to be members of households sometimes had their tablets placed in temples, convents, or institutions that provided such services for a fee. In considering funerary ritual as a mechanism of cultural standardization it is highly significant that the soul was represented as a written name (usually a posthumous *hao*) on a tablet; the repository of the soul did not take the form of icons, statues, or pictures.[35] It is surely no coincidence that the written script, a primary instrument of Chinese cultural unification, played a central role in the formal structure

32. J. Watson, "Of Flesh and Bones," pp. 161–162.

33. Strict codes govern the number of incense sticks offered; see, e.g., Stephan Feuchtwang, "Domestic and Communal Worship in Taiwan," in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 107.

34. Rubie S. Watson, *Inequality Among Brothers: Class and Kinship in South China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 41.

35. Among Hong Kong boatpeople small wooden statues of ancestors were sometimes kept on boat altars. It is significant, however, that the boat people (mostly illiterate) also maintained written ancestral tablets; see Eugene N. Anderson, Jr., *The Floating World of Castle Peak Bay*, Anthropological Studies no. 4 (Washington: American Anthropological Association, 1970), pp. 149–150.

of funerary rites. In order to follow the prescribed rites one had to have a Chinese written name—irrespective of social background,[36] education, or general level of cultural assimilation (for those of non-Han origin).

(6) The ritualized use of money and the employment of professionals. The proper conduct of Chinese funerary rites required the services of specialists who performed ritual acts in exchange for money. It was not possible, given the complex structure of rites, for mourners or untrained neighbors to perform all of these essential services. The payment of money to specialists was more than a simple monetary exchange; it was a required feature of the rites (see chapter 5). Someone, in other words, had to accept money from the mourners (or the deceased's estate or a public charity) before the corpse could be safely expelled from the community. The implications of this exchange have yet to be thoroughly analyzed, but it is evident that monetary exchange, in numerous forms, permeates Chinese funerary ritual.[37] This is testimony, perhaps, to the extent that money—as a universal medium of exchange—had penetrated into the cultural domain of late imperial China. Even in death one continued to engage in monetary exchange.[38]

(7) Music to accompany the corpse and settle the spirit. Two forms of music seem to have played a key role in the structure of funerary rites: high-pitched piping (from an oboe-like instrument) and percussion (particularly drumming). The sound of piping and drumming accompanied the corpse during critical transitions in the ritual, most notably when physical movement was required.

(8) Sealing the corpse in an airtight coffin. This action was considered by many Chinese to be the most important feature of the traditional funerary ritual. The use of coffins, usually constructed of wood, has

36. There are some interesting gender distinctions that might be pursued in future research. For instance, a deceased Cantonese woman is represented in writing by the surname of her father—not her own, personal name. Males, on the other hand, have their full posthumous names on soul tablets, tombstones, and funeral banners. This symbolic negation of female names suggests that Cantonese women are not perceived as complete human beings, at least in the context of mortuary ritual; see Rubie S. Watson, "The Named and the Nameless: Gender and Person in Chinese Society," *American Ethnologist* 13 (1986): 619–631.

37. Discussed in chapter 5; see also Hill Gates, "Money for the Gods: The Commoditization of the Spirit," *Modern China* 13 (1987): 259–277.

38. Among Cantonese in the Hong Kong New Territories, the dead sometimes continue to make annual prestations to popular deities. The offerings are made possible by the profits of the benefactor's ancestral estate, established during his lifetime. The offerings are often elaborate, and the benefits are said to accrue to the spirit of the deceased. In one case the benefactor has been dead for over four hundred years, but he continues to worship T'ien Hou (Empress of Heaven) every year on the occasion of her "birthday."

been common in China since at least the Neolithic.[39] Settling the corpse in the coffin and packing it so no movement was possible were tasks often assigned to paid specialists. Securing the lid, with nails and caulking compounds, ensured that the coffin was airtight. The ceremonial hammering of nails to seal the coffin was a centerpiece of the ritual sequence; this act was usually performed by the chief mourner or by an invited guest (i.e., someone of high social status relative to the mourners).

(9) Expulsion of the coffin from the community. When the coffin had been sealed, it was ready for removal from the village, town, or neighborhood of the deceased. This expulsion was the last formal act in the sequence of funerary rites,[40] but it need not be accomplished immediately. In fact, high-status families (including the imperial household; see Rawski's discussion in chapter 10) often kept the coffin in the domestic realm for months—even years—as a mark of respect for the deceased. But, in the end, the coffin must be expelled from the domain of the living.

As was noted earlier, there were no generally accepted guidelines—applicable everywhere in China—for the conduct of burials, cremations, and other means of disposal. In contrast, the formal expulsion of the coffin was orchestrated with considerable uniformity. At a precise moment chosen in advance by a specialist, the coffin was carried quickly out of the community by a team of pallbearers (often paid professionals). A procession of mourners and neighbors was formed to accompany the coffin to the point of disposal. When the procession had passed beyond the boundaries of the deceased's village, town, or city (often symbolized by walls and gates), the formal sequence of funeral rites had been completed.

VARIATION AND UNIFORMITY: RITES OF DISPOSAL

By isolating these nine acts as the elementary features of Chinese funerary ritual I do not mean to imply that there was no variation in performance. So long as the acts were accomplished in the approved sequence, there was room for infinite variety in ritual expression. For instance, the bathing of the corpse and the sealing of the coffin were performed differently in almost

39. David N. Keightley, "Dead But Not Gone: Cultural Implications of Mortuary Practices in Neolithic and Early Bronze Age China," paper presented at the conference on Ritual and the Social Significance of Death in Chinese Society, Oracle, Arizona, January 1985.

40. The implication of this act is that the deceased can no longer be treated (in ritual) as a member of the community once the coffin has been formally expelled. The dead retain their membership in (patrilineal) kinship organizations, but neighbors and other non-kin cease engaging in exchange with the dead at this point. The funeral, therefore, also serves as a rite of severance from the community.

every Chinese community. In my own experience of two closely related Cantonese villages (only six miles apart) there were striking contrasts in the conduct and organization of funerals, but the overall structure of the rites was similar.[41]

Herein lies the genius of the Chinese approach to cultural standardization: The system allowed for a high degree of variation within an overarching structure of unity. The rites of disposal constitute an excellent example of this principle (variation within unity). As long as the sealed coffin was removed from the community in the accepted fashion, mourners were free to dispose of the corpse according to local custom. Research on Chinese burial customs (as opposed to funerary rites) is surprisingly underdeveloped; there are whole regions of China for which we have little information on final disposal of the dead.

Most of our data derive from the south, notably Fukien, Kwangtung, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Secondary burial is practiced in these areas, and it is intriguing to see how local people have accommodated to the standardized rites. Briefly summarized, Chinese secondary burial involves an initial burial of the coffin for approximately seven to ten years, followed by an exhumation of bones, which are placed in a large pot and eventually reburied in a permanent tomb (see R. Watson's discussion in chapter 9 for details). As was outlined above, one of the fundamental features of Chinese funerary ritual is the evacuation of the corpse in an airtight coffin. This procedure is diametrically opposed to the requirements of secondary burial, which puts a premium on the rapid decomposition of the flesh (thereby allowing for the retrieval and reburial of bones).

Peasants in south China had no difficulty following the standard rites, given that the prescribed actions of a proper funeral ended when the coffin left the community. In Taiwan, Hokkien villagers sometimes bash in one end of the coffin with an axe just prior to burial; in another part of Taiwan a specialist is hired to drill holes in the coffin.[42] Among Cantonese the seal around the coffin lid is often broken before interment. All of these practices, of course, are designed to hasten the decomposition of the flesh.

In north China, secondary burial is not practiced, and in fact northerners are often revolted when they first learn about southern customs. But northerners do things that shock southerners, such as storing coffins above ground, sometimes for decades, until the death of a spouse or a parent—thereby allowing family reconstitution by simultaneous burial (see Naquin's summary in chapter 3).

41. For instance, in one village attendance at funerals depends upon neighborhood (hamlet) affiliation, whereas in the other funerals are organized by voluntary associations.

42. Photographic slides presented at the 1985 Death Ritual Conference by Emily Martin and Stuart Thompson respectively.

In the borderlands of Szechwan where Han and non-Han have interacted for centuries, many who consider themselves Han do not bury their dead at all; instead, coffins are left in hillside caves that serve as family sepulchers.[43] And finally, when considering methods of disposal, we must not forget that cremation was practiced in many parts of China, even though it was condemned by Neo-Confucian scholars and regularly banned by the state.

What is significant about these diverse practices is that they could all be accepted as "Chinese" customs. By excluding disposal from the standard set of funeral rites, state officials implicitly condoned the cultural expression of ethnic and regional differences. This may have been the consequence of a conscious policy, given that any attempt to control burial practices would have been disastrously expensive and impossible to enforce (as Communist authorities were to discover during the 1950s and 1960s). Following the standard funeral sequence, on the other hand, did not impinge very deeply into regional sensitivities, and it was a small price to pay for the privilege of being accepted as proper Chinese. Those who chose not to perform funerals according to standard procedure were marked as non-Chinese or, worse yet, as dangerous sectarians.[44] This is why it was in everyone's interest to embrace the funeral rites as an expression of cultural identity and as an affirmation of loyalty to the imperial state.

The Chinese cultural system thus allowed for the free expression of what outsiders might perceive to be chaotic local diversity. The performative domain of ritual, in particular, gave great scope for regional and subethnic cultural displays. The system was so flexible that those who called themselves Chinese could have their cake and eat it too: They participated in a unified, centrally organized culture and at the same time celebrated their local or regional distinctiveness.

The imperial state, of course, was intimately involved in the standardization of funerary ritual, but it would never have been possible to *impose* a uniform structure of rites on a society of such vast size and complexity. More subtle means were required. There is good evidence that imperial officials were engaged in the promotion of a standardized set of funeral and mourning customs throughout the empire. These norms were enshrined in county gazetteers and in ritual manuals,[45] available throughout the empire (see Naquin's discussion in chapter 3). Given what we know about the distribution of power in late imperial China, it is probable that local elites

43. See, e.g., Shih Chung-chien 石鍾健, "Ssu-ch'uan hsuan-kuan tsang" 四川懸棺葬 [Szechwan hanging burials], *Min-tsu hsueh yen-chiu* 民族學研究 [Ethnological Research] 4 (1982): 100–118.

44. J. J. M. de Groot, *Sectarianism and Religious Persecution in China* (Taipei: Ch'eng-wen Reprints, 1976 [original 1901]), pp. 231–241.

45. Manuals (printed from wood blocks) outlining the sequence of funeral ritual, with crude illustrations, can still be found in Cantonese villages, Hong Kong New Territories.

subscribed to the accepted customs and enforced a kind of ritual orthopraxy in the communities under their control. Unacceptable rites were gradually suppressed or modified to conform to centralized models.

This may well have been the mechanism for the superimposition of a standard ritual structure, but we still know little about the process of acceptance. Is the standardization we now perceive a consequence of state-sponsored social engineering carried out over a period of many centuries? Or is it the result of voluntary adoption by the general populace? Need we assume that these processes are mutually exclusive? It is obvious that there must have been some strong incentives for people of all classes and regional backgrounds to cooperate in the cultural construction of a standarized set of rites. Much more work needs to be done before we can even begin to answer these questions. What is clear, however, is that the preoccupation with performance—rather than belief—made it possible for imperial authorities, local elites, and ordinary peasants to agree on the proper *form* for the conduct of funerals.

The fact that all Chinese, irrespective of personal circumstance, appear to have been subject to the same basic set of rites is an interesting commentary on the traditional Chinese class system. This uniformity of ritual structure is not found in all class-based societies. In nineteenth-century England, for instance, paupers were treated very differently from property-owning citizens. As Laqueur notes, England was changing rapidly during this period, and notions of what constituted a minimally acceptable funeral (i.e., the basic ritual form) were changing as well.[46] Ariès, in his now classic study, *The Hour of Our Death,* documents similar changes in European mortuary customs and attitudes toward death.[47]

It is probable that China has also undergone transformations in funerary ritual over the centuries. There is some evidence, for instance, that a major change in mortuary customs occurred during the T'ang–Sung transition, corresponding to changes in the Chinese kinship system.[48] Furthermore, we may be witnessing a radical transformation in China's ritual structure today, with a new sequence of rites inspired by socialist ideology replacing the old (see Whyte's survey in chapter 12). Can we expect to find something characteristically "Chinese" in these emerging rites, or are they basically

46. Thomas Laqueur, "Bodies, Death, and Pauper Funerals," *Representations* 1 (1983): 109–131.

47. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, pp. 559–588.

48. See, e.g., David G. Johnson, *The Medieval Chinese Oligarchy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1977), pp. 94, 108; Patricia B. Ebrey, *The Aristocratic Families of Early Imperial China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 91; and Patricia Ebrey, "The Early Stages in the Development of Chinese Descent Groups," in *Kinship Organization in Late Imperial China, 1000–1940*, eds. Patricia B. Ebrey and James L. Watson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 20–29.

indistinguishable from socialist forms practiced in other parts of the world?[49] Whyte's account makes it clear that the ritual structure that helped hold China together as a coherent culture for so many centuries no longer has meaning to millions of Chinese (particularly in the cities). One wonders whether a new set of rites, together with new categories of ritual specialists, will emerge to fill the void.

49. Christel Lane, *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society, the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Christopher A. Binns, "The Changing Face of Power: Revolution and Accommodation in the Development of the Soviet Ceremonial System, Parts 1 & 2," *Man* n.s. 14 (1979): 585–601 , and 15 (1980): 170–187.